

INTEREST - A BASIC CONCEPT IN POLITICAL SCIENCE

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IN GENERAL:

It is worth endeavoring, I believe, to consider and to understand more clearly those phenomena which are regarded as political. The concept, interest, as we shall see, is fundamental to any comprehensive observation of political phenomena. Interest is present at every level in the political system and is essential in that system's operation. In one important sense, interest is the directional component within the context of which the political system is operative.

Often, the terms attitude, value and interest, were used interchangeably. This, naturally, causes no inconsiderable semantic difficulty, especially when other scholars differentiate among the terms. It is my contention that value and interest may be used interchangeably, but I would quickly add that attitude is more general and as such more distinct. Attitude is a predisposition by an actor to behave towards something—another actor, an object, or a state of affairs. Attitude is the general concept. Value or interest, then, is one component of attitude—as I men-

tioned before, it is the directional component.

More specifically, the concept of interest involves a set of wants and needs which "direct" the behavior of the actor. Wants and needs are those things which the actor perceives in a given situation to be desired or essential. The exact need of the actor, I feel, need not necessarily be known to the actor himself. For instance, an actor may want some sense of recognition to satisfy anyone of numerous possible subconscious needs. On the other hand, wants are the actual conscious desires.

II. FORMULATION :

Interest: Interconnection between an actor's wants and needs and an object providing a context in which the actor regards the object, positively or negatively.

The use of the term interconnection, here, means the relationship between the wants and needs of the actor and the object which the actor is regarding. This relationship provides the framework in which the actor approaches or regards the

object. I feel that interest or value is more than just the framework. It involves the process of the actor's perceiving his wants and needs and his application of that perception in approaching other actors' objects or states of affairs. (My use of the term object in this formulation includes not only objects as such, but other actors and states of affairs as well.) The use of the terms negatively and positively should be self explanatory. They apply to the regard of the actor to the object. This regard by the actor we term the valuation or evaluation—evaluation is an actor's decision, negative or positive, about an object in the framework of the relationship between the wants and needs of actor and the object. To put it more simply, evaluation is decision about an object through interest. It is the context in which decisions are made and as such it is basic to the entire discipline.

III. DISCUSSION OF OTHER FORMULATIONS OF INTEREST:

The following is a list of writers and their works from whom I have derived information concerning the concept interest. I have also included a discussion of what I considered to be the salient points made by each author:

Lasswell and Kaplan—Power and Society. In their discussion, Lasswell and Kaplan have defined interest as a "pattern of demands and its supporting expectations."

I agree with the authors that interest involves some type of expectations on the part of the actor towards the object. However, the term "pattern of demands" is too narrow in that it does not include the whole area of latent interest. The discussion of valid interests, assumed interest, expediency interests, and principled interests provided me with a framework within which I could build a content dimension into interest.

Truman—Governmental Process. Truman's definition of interest as "shared attitudes" is too broad for my goal. As I have stated in my introduction, attitude is a predisposition by an actor to behave towards something—another actor, an object, or a state of affairs. As such, attitude is the more general concept of which interest and value are a part.

Perry—Realms of Values. Perry's article pointed out the ends—means relationship in the formulation of interest. "A means is the object of an interest which is asymmetrically dependent on an ulterior interest whose object is the end." Another aspect of the article was the discussion of the positive and negative approach. In the case of the negative approach, one's interest might call for the avoidance of an object.

Lundberg—Conflicting Concepts of National Interest. This selection was interesting from the standpoint that it pointed out one aspect of interest which is quite

prevalent in political science literature, national interest. Mr. Lundberg has described national interest as "values cherished by the people of a nation or by *de-facto* spokesman in relation to costs and available resources." National interest, public interest and group interest are terms which are found rather numerous in political literature, and therefore need to be taken into account in any general discussion of interest.

Loewenstein - Political Power. The Loewenstein article has provided us with a discussion of the relevance of interest groups to government. Mr. Loewenstein has stated that interests are put into action by group membership and that interest groups assume governmental roles.

Friedrich - Interest Groups and Economic Councils. Although the Friedrich article dealt mostly with interest groups, we found it valuable from the standpoint of his discussion of general and specific interests. Friedrich has stated that an interest is "narrow or broad depending upon the number of human beings whose interest is identified with it." An interest would have widest application if it was one embraced by the whole nation.

IV. RELATED CONCEPTS :

As we have stated before, we consider interest to be fundamental to any observation of political phenomena. If we are correct in including interest in a list of concepts which is fundamental to political phenomena, we can discern interest within the framework of *political* by relating it to other political science concepts. Interest involves decision-making, the policies which put wants and needs into action form; consensus includes agreement or acceptance on values and interests; power is used to accomplish certain wants and needs; representation involves the agency which A and B share in common; and parties are those entities which represent interests either general or specific.

In the non-political science category, actor would appear to be the most basic concept. Interest involves an actor (s) and an object and the interaction between the two.

Most of the functional non-political science concepts would appear to be relevant to us to a formulation of interest. Values and attitudes are a very important component of interest. Interest may ultimately involve social change and social movement. Leadership and bureaucratization can certainly be discerned in the interest group structure.